CHAPTER THREE

The AGEN excavations 2001-10: Methodology

By Paul Everill

Introduction

As has been described elsewhere (see Chapter Two for discussion of the work undertaken up to 1998) archaeological work at Nokalakevi has taken many forms since the first excavations in 1930. Since the withdrawal of state funding for the previous expedition (1973-1998), resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent economic and social turmoil, three international collaborations have operated in Nokalakevi, including a small Swiss-Georgian Expedition which excavated four test pits in 2006/7, and an ongoing Norwegian-Georgian conservation and restoration project which began in 2010. By far the largest and longest-lived of these is the extant Anglo-Georgian Expedition which, in 2012, became the longest running, explicitly international, collaborative excavation to date in western Georgia (overtaking the British-Georgian Pichvnari Expedition, led by Amiran Kakhidze and Michael Vickers, which operated very successfully from 1998-2009). The longevity of the Anglo-Georgian Expedition is, in itself, a great success and reflects the strength of a collaboration underpinned by personal friendships and shared goals. In terms of professional output, the work of AGEN has undoubtedly added greatly to the body of evidence regarding human activity at Nokalakevi from pre-history to modern times, which is discussed in the following chapters. However, ten seasons of excavation from 2001 have also witnessed a considerable number of Georgian and British trainees, and it may be that this is ultimately the more significant legacy of the expedition.

The principal objectives of the Anglo-Georgian Expedition from 2001 can be outlined as follows:

1) The collaborative study and conservation of the important historic site of Nokalakevi-Archaeopolis-Tsikhegoji; its standing and buried remains; its situation in a wider geographical and historical context; and its prehistoric origins. To achieve this, the expedition depends on the contribution of archaeologists, historians, osteologists, ceramicists, conservators, palaeobotanists and other specialists. The expedition is founded on, and continues to encourage, the collaborative exchange of knowledge and expertise between Georgian and British specialists, including those from other disciplines who have an interest in working in and around Nokalakevi.
2) The training of archaeology students from Georgian, British and other universities is a key objective of the expedition. A programme of on- and off-site training has been conceived to ensure that student participants experience as great a diversity of tasks as possible, above and beyond the basic requirements of their university degree programme.

Between 2001 and 2010, students from six British universities have undertaken work at Nokalakevi as part of the fieldwork requirement of their degree programmes alongside non-student volunteers from USA, Australia, Holland, Belgium and Poland. Georgian archaeology students have also been trained in the methodology utilised at Nokalakevi, as a concerted and deliberate effort to provide young Georgian archaeologists with the skills required for modern professional practice. Initial discussions between the Georgian and British directors, prior to the first field season in 2001, determined that the deeply stratified archaeological deposits of Nokalakevi warranted the use of a recording system that was best able to cope satisfactorily with a complex urban site. This factor, combined with the previous work experience of the British archaeologists and the desire to train students in modern methodology, led to the adoption of the Single Context Recording (SCR) system. SCR, as utilised by the Museum of London Archaeology Service, forms the basis of the dominant methodology currently applied in British urban, developer-funded, archaeology. SCR sytematises the reduction of deeply stratified archaeological deposits without reference to section recording, although sections may be integrated where deposits are

particularly complex. The expedition was the first to introduce this methodology to Georgian archaeology and was able to arrange for the MoLAS *Site Manual* (MoLAS 1994) to be translated into Georgian. Subsequently RESCUE: The British Archaeological Trust's handbook *First Aid for Finds* (Watkinson and Neal 1998) was also translated into Georgian. Both these manuals are now used in the teaching of Georgian archaeology students. However, as will be discussed, the expedition has found Single Context Recording to be inadequate for the broader research and training goals of Nokalakevi.

The development of British methodology

The British urban archaeological tradition stems largely from Martin Biddle's work in Winchester (1961-71), and Philip Barker's work at sites such as Hen Domen (1960-1988) and, particularly, Wroxeter (1966-1990). Both men, working in parallel, though not in isolation, perfected so-called 'open area' excavation as a significant step forward from the then prevalent tradition of box trenches known in Britain as the 'Wheeler-Kenyon method' (derived initially from the excavations directed by Sir Mortimer Wheeler in the 1930s and developed, by his student Dame Kathleen Kenyon, in the 1950s). The idea of utilising a grid of box trenches was to allow the recording in detail of a series of sections, giving 'vertical' data pre-eminence over horizontal plans. This emphasised the sequence of stratification which, many thought, could not be appropriately illuminated by layers. However, at Maiden Castle Wheeler himself had abandoned box trenches in order to shed more light on complex horizontal stratigraphy. Certainly both Biddle and Barker considered their 'open area' excavation to be a continuation of Wheeler's drive for greater stratigraphic clarity utilising 'continuing' sections derived from a series of temporary baulks across the site, to be drawn and removed at regular intervals (Martin Biddle pers. comm.). However Barker also suggested that the focus on vertical sections on some sites often led to a paucity in the recording of horizontal plans. The move away from box trenches and towards the use of large, 'open area' excavation was pioneered in the 1930s and 40s by van Giffen in Holland, Hatt and Steensberg in Denmark, and Bersu in Germany and Britain. It was further developed in Britain in the 1950s by Hurst and Golson working at Wharram Percy, and Frere at Verulamium (Barker 1982: 16-21). Biddle himself describes being particularly influenced by the work of Hurst and Frere and, through them, back to Steensberg (Martin Biddle pers. comm.). However, it is fair to say that the work of Biddle and Barker perfected and popularised this methodological approach, which insisted on the accurate recording of deposits in both plan and section.

The extensive excavations at Winchester and Wroxeter tackled incredibly complex sequences of deposits and engendered new ways of working and, perhaps more importantly, new ways of organising and interpreting the data produced. However, the projects were quite different in character. Biddle's excavations combined a 'rescue' and research focus, having negotiated time ahead of development in order to undertake the work. The scale of the operation, while not unusual in today's commercial environment, was literally ground-breaking then. The sheer number of excavators and deposits demanded academic and organisational rigour and a firm hand on the rudder. Biddle's future wife, Birthe, an exemplary archaeologist in her own right, became an invaluable member of the Winchester team in 1964. In contrast, Barker's excavations at Wroxeter – though no less rigorous – dealt with shallower sequences, perhaps allowing the time to set 'best practice' methodological yardsticks. His focus on the theory of excavation led to the publication of the methodological bible, "Techniques of Archaeological Excavation", in 1977 (2nd edition: Barker 1982), which set a new benchmark for the standard of archaeological work, but one that was, admittedly, time-consuming. Barker's approach was initially ridiculed by traditionalists for its apparently slow pace, before he silenced all his critics by revealing incredible sequences of late/post-Roman timber buildings that contradicted established opinion on the lifespan of Wroxeter Roman city (White 2006). Such evidence would simply never have been found through the excavation methods that came before.

Biddle's great success was in the use of Open Area excavation – perhaps the first application of it on a 'rescue' site of that size – but also the organisational rigour that he employed, some of which he learnt from Wheeler (Collis 2011). His projects, like Barker's at Wroxeter, attracted domestic and international students of archaeology, who returned home taking with them this approach to archaeological excavation which became known as the Winchester Method, or La Méthode Winchester in the USA and France (Everill and

White 2011; Collis 2011). The removal of permanent baulks, and the widening of the area under excavation, was consequently a product of the desire to reveal the greatest extent of the layers that characterise an urban site, as much as it was a recognition that the use of permanent baulks often acted to obscure important, structural relationships.

However, other methodological developments emanated from Winchester that ultimately ran contrary to the ideals expressed by both Biddle and Barker. A young Bermudan named Edward Harris gained his first excavation experience under the Biddles, as an Ordinary Digger on the Cathedral Green site, Winchester, in 1967. In 1968 he worked as a Principal Digger and demonstrated great potential as an excavator during the work at St Swithun's tomb, which led to him being asked to take on an Assistant Supervisory role in 1969 (Martin Biddle, pers. comm.), when he was first required to undertake site recording. Harris worked at Wolvesey Palace, Winchester, in 1970-1, before working in Bergen, Norway, where he began formulating his ideas on stratigraphic recording. By early 1973, under Biddle's patronage, Harris was employed by the Winchester Research Unit to work on the Lower Brook Street excavation archive. Originally conceived in February 1973, from doodles while working late one evening interpreting the complex stratigraphical data, the Harris matrix, or simply the stratigraphic matrix, allows the schematic presentation of incredibly complex sequences of contexts as an aid to interpretation. This in itself provides a useful tool to archaeologists, however Harris took his ideas a step further and, with others, laid the foundations for Single Context Recording which had, at its heart and effectively governing the process, the stratigraphic matrix. The innovation of planning individual contexts in isolation was first suggested to Harris by Laurence Keen, then Director of the Southampton Archaeological Research Unit, who had regular contact with the Winchester Research Unit and had already trialled the idea (Edward Harris pers. comm.). The concept was adopted along with the first use of a rolling stratigraphic matrix on site during the 1975 rescue excavation at New Road, Winchester, making it the first site to make use of the embryonic Single Context Recording system. This project was supervised by Patrick Ottaway (working for the Winchester City Rescue Archaeologist, Ken Qualmann) who had been encouraged by Harris to trial this new approach – an experiment supported by Qualmann (Patrick Ottaway pers.comm.). Harris and Ottaway published an article outlining "A recording experiment on a rescue site" in Rescue News (Harris and Ottaway 1976), however later publication of the excavation contains conventional section drawings and no reference to SCR (Qualmann *et al* 2004). Shortly after the start of work at New Road, Harris approached Brian Hobley, then Chief Archaeologist at the Museum of London's Department for Urban Archaeology, asking if he would also trial this new system. The large excavation at the General Post Office site in London, which also began in 1975, was selected for this purpose and site supervisor Andy Boddington reported it to be a great success (Edward Harris pers. comm.). When Steve Roskams arrived at the site the following year, he worked on developing the system with the GPO team, which ultimately led to the creation of the DUA *Site Manual* in 1980 (Steve Roskams pers. comm.). Harris, during his PhD in London from 1976 to 1979, maintained regular contact with the DUA team while continuing to develop his theories on stratification that would be published as *Principles of Archaeological Stratigraphy* (Harris 1979).

Single Context Recording, therefore, is ultimately a composite of several innovations, first brought together by Harris before the system was developed through application by the Department for Urban Archaeology. The DUA merged with the Department of Greater London Archaeology to form the Museum of London Archaeology Service in 1991. Others had developed their own stratigraphic flow diagrams and recording systems at around the same time (e.g Steve Roskams and Henry Hurst at Carthage in 1974 [Steve Roskams pers. comm.]) and consequently the DUA system stems from the work of several people. However, clearly Harris was the driving force behind the first expression of what would now be called Single Context Recording, the key elements of which are:

1) The Stratigraphic/ Harris Matrix
2) Individual units of stratification
3) Pro-forma recording sheets
4) Single context plans

Under this system section drawings were rendered almost a resource of last resort, and plans were to consist of single contexts in isolation. The plan drawings themselves became subject to their own stratigraphy, being overlain during post-excavation analysis according to the matrix, so that the phases could be re-constructed and interpreted. Harris wrote, in his first publication on the implementation of a matrix in 1975, "when studying

stratification, many excavators rely on the section as a way to work out the relationships between the layers of a site; the layer plan is usually ignored in stratigraphic analysis, partly because the standing section or baulk works on an excavation against the recovery of the plan of each layer" (Harris 1975: 110). He goes on to add, "the section of the face of the baulk, cannot, except on the simplest sites, reflect either the vagaries of individual layers or represent any but the most local of stratigraphic sequences. Arguments of chronology or of the sequence of a complex stratigraphic situation based on sectional analysis must be suspect or completely fallacious" (Harris 1975: 110). He was, of course, partly correct in that assessment, though his criticisms seem to be of the old Wheeler-Kenyon method, the problems with which had already been amply demonstrated. Both Biddle and Barker (and others including, in fact, Wheeler himself) had advocated, for a number of years, that both the vertical and horizontal record should be considered, and in combination would provide the accuracy Harris appears to have sought through the application of a synthetic stratigraphic matrix.

That said, the use of proforma recording sheets, rather than notebooks, and individual stratigraphic units (the term 'context' is used in Britain, but other terms are used elsewhere) provided a simple method for ensuring that every context – each one representing a temporal event in the sequence – is recorded fully (and comparably) regardless of subjective significance. The issue of temporality is key to the successful analysis of a site's stratigraphy. Rather than grouping deposits, determined as belonging to the same period by their associated finds, the application of individual units of stratification correctly identifies that each relates to a specific event. Consequently a stratigraphic matrix becomes a readable storyboard of all of the events that led to the formation of the site. However, in reality, carefully observed section drawings are an important component of the overall site archive, if their local limitations are acknowledged. Equally it would be disingenuous to suggest that a stratigraphic matrix represents an infallible, final word on a site, and clearly a matrix includes significant elements of interpretation.

Biddle and Barker continued to favour the use of phase plans and section drawings over the emerging Single Context Recording system. Barker argued that the separation of the drawn record into individual contexts made it harder to reinterpret the evidence in post-excavation (Everill and White 2011: 176-7). He also wrote that "where, in my experience, such a [matrix] has been used it has not altered the interpretation arrived at from the study of the ground and the plans and sections. It is more an instrument for aiding clear thinking and coherent publication than for primary interpretation" (Barker 1982: 203). Certainly the huge quantity of incredibly detailed drawings from Barker's excavations were a hallmark of his approach that recognised the crucial importance of careful and patient excavation and recording. However, the great strength of Harris' broader approach was in the organisation of the data and the systematising of a methodology that supported the birth of the British profession, underpinned by common approaches to recording. The use of individual stratigraphic units and pro-forma recording sheets crucially enabled the more effective administration of the archive.

AGEN Methodology

The appeal of SCR to many British archaeologists in the 1970s and 80s, was the apparently efficient and non-hierarchical system that it produced, within which individual, experienced excavators have responsibility for the area that they are excavating and are expected to work with minimal supervision. This was welcomed, in part, as a rejection of the very hierarchical site organisation favoured by excavators like Wheeler and Biddle. However on most research projects, which are often less constrained in terms of time, the majority of those on site have little or no previous experience and require close supervision, training and management. For this and other reasons the expedition has, since 2001, moved away from a strict adherence to Single Context Recording and towards the combined horizontal and vertical approaches utilised by advocates of Open Area excavation. The expedition does, however, assign unique numbers to individual contexts, and recording is undertaken on a series of registers and sheets that form a modern paper archive. Site drawings are produced on permatrace, and a rolling stratigraphic matrix has been constructed as an aid to interpretation and discussion, though it is not the engine that drives the recording process as it would be in a pure Single Context Recording system. Operating in a non-commercial environment the expedition is able to place more emphasis on training and best practice. It has been possible to select a methodology that best suits the combined goals of research and teaching, in which the need to pause excavation to undertake phase planning, for example,

does not impact negatively. Like Biddle and Barker, we have opted to utilise 'phase plans', which show more clearly the relationship between different contextual elements of structures and associated features, and we also utilise multi-phase plans at the start and/ or completion of each field season in order to map annual progress. In consequence the methodology employed at Nokalakevi is one that stems from the excavations of Biddle, Barker and others, incorporating some of the methodological innovations of Single Context Recording.

The use of experienced (five years or more) commercial archaeologists as British trench supervisors (working in collaboration with Georgian trench supervisors with several seasons' experience of working at Nokalakevi with this methodology) ensures that the on-site training of students is led by archaeologists with current and extensive archaeological experience, gained from a wide variety of site types and periods. From 2001 to 2010 all British trench supervisors (this author [Trench B: 2002-03], Andy Ginns [Trench A: 2004], Kathryn Grant [Trench A: 2006-09], Chris Russel [Trench B: 2009], Adam Slater [Trench A: 2010] and Laura James [Trench B: 2010]) and Site Directors (Nick Armour to 2003, and this author from 2004) were first recruited from UK commercial organisations. Georgian archaeologists Nikoloz Murgulia (Trench A supervisor) and Ana Tvaradze (Trench B) have worked at Nokalakevi since 2003 and 2007 respectively.

The implementation of a modern excavation methodology was supplemented in 2009 with the undertaking of an RTK GPS survey of standing structures (including the excavated foundations in the lower town and the three phases of fortification walls) and topography. This survey provided the most detailed plan of the site to date, and was the first to locate the site with UTM Zone 38N coordinates. The author and Dr Phil Marter spent a total of 15 days mapping the 20ha site, during which 3,145 points were measured (Everill *et al* 2011). The GPS survey undertaken in 2009 is valuable for a number of reasons. First and foremost it has allowed the current expedition to produce a modern, digital plan of the site that is tied into an accurate global position. The flexibility of this digital resource will enable future survey work to be added to the data available, as new remains are revealed, and even enable far broader landscape analysis to be undertaken. This work could extend beyond the site and its hinterland, incorporating other archaeological sites in the region.

The following two chapters summarise the results of excavations undertaken by the Anglo-Georgian Expedition to Nokalakevi from 2001-2010. The excavations are described with reference to individual contexts and structures, with individual numbers assigned to each and every fill, cut, layer, skeleton and masonry. Within the text, context numbers are referred to in bold for ease of identification. Each context is described in the annual interim reports, therefore in the following two chapters only key contexts and interpretation will be discussed.

Bibliography

Barker, P. 1982. *Techniques of Archaeological Excavation* (2nd Edition). London, B.T. Batsford Ltd

Collis, J. 2011. The urban revolution: Martin Biddle's excavations in Winchester, 1961-1971. In Schofield, J. (ed) *Great Excavations: Shaping the archaeological profession*. Oxford, Oxbow Books: 74-86

Everill, P., Marter, P., Lomitashvili, D., and Murgulia, N. 2011. Mapping Archaeopolis: GPS survey at the multi-period site of Nokalakevi. *Bulletin of the Georgian National Museum. Series of Social Sciences* #2 (47-B): 117-130 (in Georgian)

Everill, P. and White, R. 2011. Philip Barker's Wroxeter. In Schofield, J. (ed) *Great Excavations: Shaping the archaeological profession*. Oxford, Oxbow Books: 167-180

Harris, E. 1975. The Stratigraphic Sequence: A question of time. *World Archaeology* 7 (1): 109-121

Harris, E. 1979. *Principles of Archaeological Stratigraphy*. London, Academic Press Ltd

Harris, E. and Ottaway, P. 1976. A recording experiment on a rescue site. *Rescue News* 12: 6-7

MOLAS 1994. *Archaeological site manual*. London, MoLAS

Qualmann, K., Rees, H., Scobie, G. and Whinney, R. 2004. *Oram's Arbour. The Iron Age enclosure at Winchester Volume 1: Investigations 1950-99*. Winchester, Winchester Museums Service

Watkinson, D. E. and Neal, V. 1998. *First Aid for Finds*. RESCUE & UKIC

White, R. 2006. Excavating Wroxeter at the end of the twentieth century. In Ellis, P. and White, R. (eds) *Wroxeter Archaeology. Excavation and research on the defences and in the town, 1968-1992*. Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological and Historical Society 78: 165-9